Conflict Prevention and the Role of the Media

Mariano Aguirre, Francisco Ferrándiz and
José Manuel Pureza

A series of wars over the last decade have produced complex emergencies that have led to various combinations of genocide, famine, destruction of infrastructure, enforced displacement of populations and regional destabilisation. There are now violent situations in around 30 countries, which produce over a thousand victims per year in battles over political power or territory. The leading actors in these conflicts are very often corrupt and repressive States and non-state armed groups. These wars are part of, and instrumental to, illegal economies based on resources such as diamonds, oil, timber, and on illicit trades of weapons and drugs.

There is an ever-stronger connection between violent groups such as drug traffickers, paramilitary organisations and mercenaries. These conflicts usually have a strong regional impact, which manifests itself in refugee flows, illegal arms sales and environmental destruction. In the last 20 years academics, political actors and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been exploring the roots and characteristics of these conflicts. And the Media has increasingly focused its attention on them.

Most of the knowledge that we have about these conflicts, their victims and their characteristics is obtained through the media. With the exception of political actors and NGOs with relevant activity in the field or academics that conduct research in these countries, international society constructs its knowledge about modern peace and war based on the messages that the media offer every day. This fact gives journalists and the media great power over the life and death of millions of people. If television shows the dramatic situation of some social group, and if influential mainstream newspapers lobby in favour of «doing something», then the victims have more chance of being protected by

the international community. On the other hand, if the media doesn't play a critical role, certain Governments can prepare the scenario for an unjust war or simply do nothing. In the field of conflict prevention, the media can play an important role by providing reliable and credible information, and alerting society and decision makers about dangerous situations.

Present-day armed conflicts tend to break out within States that are fragile and lack legitimate, structured institutions. The difference between the civil population and military forces is unclear, and State and non-State protagonists wage war with no regard for humanitarian law. From the Balkans to Colombia, via Somalia, Sudan, Rwanda, the former Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and East Timor, the phenomenon of armed conflicts in fragile states is one of the twenty-first century's crucial problems. Foreign reaction varies according to the protagonists involved —states, multilateral organisations and NGOs— and their standing in the international system.

The *powerful states* with global interests have wavered between empowering the United Nations to manage these conflicts, and directly tackling them themselves, either unilaterally or together with other states that share common interests.

During the 1990's, *multilateral organisations* have fought for political space (that should be delegated by powerful states), economic support and even for the military power of coercion. The proposal by the former UN General Secretary UN, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, to create a standby peace force which can act for prevention has not been adopted by states because it would grant the Secretary-General power over them and enable him to act coercively. During the last 14 years the position of the United States and the European states changed from a cautious delegation of power to the UN for universal interventions to a reinforcement of selected interventions lead by regional powers or by NATO.

For their part, *NGOs* have the prestige, social support and the political and economic backing from societies, States and institutions such as the European Union (EU) that support them to manage the most dramatic consequences of humanitarian crises. But currently, NGOs face two problems. First, some complex emergencies are beyond their capacities and they are not getting enough support from States and multilateral organisations. Second, some States are using them as secondary actors after they have fought their wars, as in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq.

These three groups, together with academics, peace and security research institutions and journalists, have debated the response to wars, violations of human rights and complex emergencies. The debate

lies in the tension between the Realist concept based on the singular interest of the nation-state, and the cooperative ideal which seeks the common good of international society, furthered by the so-called Liberal school of thought. This tension will be crucial for the current century. A possible solution lies in a cosmopolitan approach to the victims and the responses: it means to consider that massive violations of human rights and the massive exclusion of millions of people are issues that must be addressed by the international community of States. Human rights, their implementation, and conflict prevention policies are common goods and there is a responsibility to protect them.

The concept of conflict prevention

Modern wars have their origins in different internal causes. As they tend to take place in countries on the periphery of the global system, there is a strong link between the economic policies directed at them and their domestic reality. Rapid modernisation, for example, linked with integration into the global market can increase inequalities and social tensions. Therefore decisions taken in central countries or international financial institutions on prices of raw materials, arms sales or credit policies affect these countries owing to their dependency and weakness. This weakness can be a trump card in conflict prevention.

Conflict prevention aims to stop tensions from escalating into violence by means of short-, medium- and long-term. Theoretically, the more effective the preventive action the less tension there will be and the greater the distancing of violence. No single measure excludes the others. Prevention can include coercive diplomacy (e.g. arms embargos); institutional incentives (e.g. aid in exchange for peace); co-operative management (e.g. easing mediation); and systematic transformations (e.g. constructing a legal system). The wider the perspective, the more dynamic the response will be.

Just as there is no mechanical relationship between factors that generate conflicts, there cannot be a mathematical summation of action that will halt violent escalation. Conflicts are in the hands of people and the results are always unpredictable. Furthermore, prevention should be carried out cautiously (in order to avoid producing the opposite effect) but without trusting in its results.

Lund says that prevention should signify immediate diplomatic or military interventions so as to bring about an immediate halt to violence and towards political and socio-economic structural changes, which improve people's standard of living. Therefore prevention includes:

1) Actions, policies or institutions which are used in order to avoid a significant and constant escalation of violence; internal or international disputes at times or places which are particularly vulnerable («vertical escalation»);
2) The promotion of activities that bring about non-violent reconciliation of the interests in dispute;
3) This reconciliation includes helping to prevent the conflict from starting up again once attention is turned to avoiding other conflicts («horizontal escalation»).

The Carnegie Commission on the Prevention of Deadly Conflicts studied the question for three years and has come up with an important final study. Its definition is based on avoiding vertical and horizontal escalation and preventing a renewed breakout of violence in conflicts that have ended. The strategies for prevention are set down in three principles:

a) Act rapidly on the earliest signs of the problem (this implies possessing prior knowledge of the ethnic, linguistic and socio-economic, national and religious roots of conflict);
b) Act from the outside using political, economic, social and military measures to relieve the pressure that has sparked the violence;
c) Activate policies that resolve the underlying problems lying at the roots of the violence.

The Commission groups the strategies for prevention under *operational prevention* and *structural prevention*. In the former, an external protagonist (state, multilateral organisations, a prestigious personality) sets in motion a political-military and humanitarian strategy aimed at halting the escalation of violence and restoring the internal politics of the state affected. Operational prevention includes having the capacity to anticipate and analyse potential conflicts (early warning), acting on opportunities that arise unexpectedly, putting the problem in the hands of the UN Security Council and the relevant regional organisations, and encouraging preventive diplomacy, both public and secret. It also involves using economic measures such as sanctions, the exchange of specific measures for commercial profits, and making aid and investment conditional.

The degree of force employed has to be in proportion with the goals to be achieved and should be utilised within the framework of the UN Charter. It is interesting to note that, according to this Charter, force is not merely to be used as a last resort. Governments who commit genocide should realise that certain behaviour is unacceptable to the

international community, and force can also be applied for preventive deployment (such as in Macedonia since 1992). The application of international law and mechanisms to resolve disputes, as well as strategies to satisfy the economic, social, political, cultural and humanitarian needs of those affected by conflicts and post-war reconstruction are included to prevent the outbreak of conflict. The Carnegie Commission believes that no matter the type of society, the pillars of peace are security, social welfare and justice.

With regard to security, the Commission includes the non-proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, and the control of conventional ones, with attention to the small arms that are most often used in today's wars. Another dimension is the security within a state that comes from having laws, a legitimate police force and impartial judicial and penal systems. Welfare implies access to basic personal needs: drinking water, health service, education, home and equal employment opportunities. To reach these goals a redefinition of the concept of development is required, together with aid and foreign investment that favour sustainable development, as well as a revaluation of the role of the state, which must be run openly and efficiently. In addition, the OECD emphasises long-term development and sees a single continuous process of conflict prevention, humanitarian emergency operations, institutionalisation and reconciliation in peace processes.

Also in recent years, the European Commission and the Parliament have produced several documents and debates over conflict prevention. Initially the Commission was reluctant to commit itself to a structural concept of conflict prevention and chose to work on the development of Early Warning. However, in later documents the approach has changed and the Commission is planning to use different instruments, including:

a. Promoting regional integration and trade links;
b. Introducing the concept of conflict prevention in its development programmes;
c. Supporting democracy, the rule of law and civil society
d. Reforming the security sector;
e. Post-conflict demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration programmes;
f. Addressing issues as drug trafficking, small arms, scarcity of natural resources; and migration;
g. Use the Community's instruments, such as diplomacy, the Rapid Reaction Mechanism, sanctions, crisis-management machinery;
h. Cooperation with other international organizations, such as the United Nations and the World Bank.

A positive role for the media?

As Cecilia Bruhn explains in her chapter, the relation between conflict prevention and the media is still an unexplored issue. We know that bad journalism can promote violence, but we do not know how good journalism may have an positive influence and impact on the prevention of armed conflicts. There is a need also to explore how the domestic and the international media operate in some particular cases, and the interfaces with international institutions and Governments. In Rwanda in 1994, some domestic media openly promoted genocide, while international media mostly ignored the situation. At the same time, some Belgium military officials alerted the UN and the Western Governments of a dangerous situation that was going to erupt at any given moment, but the US, some European Governments and the bureaucratic machine of the UN did not react at all.

In his chapter, José Manuel Pureza proposes the creation of a new journalistic paradigm, one that efficiently contributes to the human combat against genocidal culture. In fact, as some of the papers in this volume suggest, the very idea and practice of conflict prevention can be the main axis for the articulation of new forms of journalism. For Jean-Paul Marthoz, to develop this conflict prevention journalism, or early warning journalism, media needs to show a renewed flexibility to cope with shifting situations, developing new information-gathering and dissemination strategies that avoid the short-circuits of conventional reporting. Expressions such as "empathy exhaustion", "outrage fatigue" or "catastrophe excess" were frequently heard in the working sessions at the Coimbra conference, and point to the saturation of the main patterns in which information on Human Rights, war and disaster have been managed in recent decades. To be of any use, the new preventive journalism has to be able to do away with this emerging feeling of powerlessness and find imaginative ways to reconnect with audiences at all levels. Suggestions such as the training of local, national and international media staff in a "conflict prevention culture", or the search for ways to make conflict prevention newsworthy in all media formats were raised in the debates. How to go about it should be permanently open to debate, and the different contributions in this book offer some suggestions in this direction.

One important issue to start with is to analyse and deconstruct the ways in which the media liberally assume ready-to-use plots to represent the different parties in conflict situations. Instead of creating narratives that portray the 'other' as a threat, as fanatical and irrational, which is a too common feature of mainstream reporting, the media

could contribute to constructing a fair representation of different countries, cultures and people. For example, Robert Hudson analyses in his chapter how the people of the Balkans have been misrepresented by some famous academics and journalists, such as Robert Kaplan, who with emphasized historical essentialisms that added little to peace building. We have more recent examples of this process in Afghanistan or Irak, where the massive construction of a dangerous "enemy" of the West and the world, to which the mainstream media was a privileged accomplice, erased all possible avenues for conflict prevention. These essentialisms contribute more to gross misinterpretations than to a nuanced, preventive analysis that cuts across stereotypes and provides more realistic portrayals of the situation on the ground.

Beyond the avoidance of simplifying and, often stigmatizing plots, the media can also play a positive role in many of the prevention activities described. Journalists can provide information for the implementation of early warning policies, and can contribute knowledge and indications about situations, actors and their aims, and can also help to promote those actors that are active in peace policies. On the other hand, the media can contribute to hate or ignorance. Frivolous, bad and unethical journalism could generate more harm than bias journalism. Unfortunately, the rules of high tech and fast information promote a type of reporting and analysis (or lack thereof) that provide a very superficial and very often erroneous perspective of conflicts, their roots and their actors.

Journalists can also help to explain the international context of conflicts, and the way in which these fragile States are linked to legal and illegal networks, and the multinational corporations and international financial institutions toward them. The media also has the power to explain the links between two apparently different areas: development and conflicts. Through their reports some journalists present examples of how poverty, inequality and exploitation are at the roots of social and armed conflicts.

According to Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen, development co-operation should be a "process of opening up real freedoms that the people can enjoy". Development as a process of freedom depends upon a series of factors such as social agreements for education, access to healthcare and recognised political and civil rights. Sen supports a concept of development that links freedom, democracy and information in order to increase the quality of life of people and to help promote more stable societies. The Media could be a tool for the construction of freedom, social agreements, participation and recognition and protection of rights.

Conflict prevention policies are finding many difficulties. Since 11 September 2001, most cooperation policies have passed to the

backstage. Force is replacing negotiations. Unilateralism is displacing multilateralism. The war against global terrorism is occupying the place of development and humanitarian policies. The US government is manipulating even the concept of prevention by using the idea of *pre-emptive war* —something that has been accepted by Javier Solana, head of European Security and Foreign Policy.

Conflict prevention policies confront a situation in which there are several trends:

a) The pre-eminence of the national interests of global and regional powers over common interests. Multilateralism is losing ground and the idea of regional hegemonic leaders is returning;
b) The global economy is based on low-risk investment with high gains in the short term. Structural prevention implies investment, which carries a risk with a possible indirect gain in the long term. Analysis is needed which investigates if it is more profitable to prevent than manage crises and collaborate in reconstruction;
c) Immediate prevention can be capitalised on politically by those governments or institutions that propose it (if it proves efficient). But public opinion and the media comprehend better a war or a breakdown in negotiations than the process that avoids it. The media have a responsibility to give sufficient coverage to the preventive and diplomatic processes.

The modern international system is a mix of State and non-State actors, of State-centric and multi-centric approaches, and non-territorial networks. On the on hand, these changes must be understood by International Law. But on the other, the media must try to reflect and understand the different aspects and trends of this complex world. To develop this task the media should work on the reconceptualisation of concepts such as security and Human Rights as well as the importance of multilateralism. The social practice of journalism must be redefined as a contributor to conflict prevention and conflict resolution.

Multilateralism is a crucial factor for conflict prevention policies. And an open perspective that would include State and Non State actors is a necessity. To tackle problems such as poverty or war there is a need to coordinate policies among States, the EU, UN, the G-8 and civil societies from inside and outside the affected States. The work should be done at different levels: development, humanitarian action, human rights, world trade, among others. The responsible media should work from and inside the approach of the needs of the people (human security) and the needs of the international system (multilateralism). Those two concepts should be their guidelines.

Conflict prevention is a concept to be developed. It is also a concept to be protected from being pre-empted by spurious interests that might transform it into just another empty buzz-word. It receives its nourishment from human rights, international law, economic development, theories of the State and democracy, and the verification that modern armed conflicts carry consequences to be avoided because, in the end, prevention can be simpler, cheaper and less brutal than cure.

References

PUREZA, José M., *El patrimonio común de la humanidad*, Editorial Trotta, Madrid, 2002; *The responsability to protect*, Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, International Development Centre, Ottawa, 2001

NICOLAÏDES, Kalypso, «International Preventive Action: Developing a Strategic Framework», in Robert Y. Rotberg, *Vigilance and Vengeance*, Brookings Institution Press and the World Peace Foundation, Washington D.C., 1996. p. 56.

CROSS, Peter, (Ed.), *Contributing to Preventive Action. Conflict Preventive Action Yearbook 1997/1998*, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Brussels, 1998.

LUND, Michael, «Preventing Violent Conflicts: Progress and Shortfall», in Cross (ed.), *Contributing to Preventing Action*. P. 21.

Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, *Preventing Deadly Conflict: Final Report*, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Washington D.C., 1997.

Guidelines on Conflict, Peace and Development and Co-operation, OECD, Paris, 1997.

Comunication from the Commission on Conflict Prevention, Commission of the European Communities, Brussels, 11.4.2001. COM (2001) 211 final.